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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MUSLIM RIOTING IN BANGALORE HANDLED WELL BY NEW BJP
GOVERNMENT

REFS: A) Chennai 170, B) Chennai 104

1. (SBU) Riots broke out in one of Bangalore's Muslim districts on July 11 following the desecration of two mosques and some hot-headed agitation. Police apparently acted professionally to quell the violence. This may help calm some Muslim concerns about the attitude of Karnataka's newly elected BJP government towards the state's Muslim minority. Allegations that Muslim politicians trying to gain support ahead of local elections may have perpetrated the desecration of the mosques, however, speak to the unease of many Muslims about the BJP's rule.

Locals take offense at desecration of mosque

2. (U) Muslims from the Jaya Chamarajendra Nagar and Hebbal areas of Bangalore took to the streets on July 11 following the discovery of pig heads placed at the entrance of two local mosques. (Muslims consider pigs "unclean" and the placement of the heads of these animals in the proximity of a mosque would give Muslims great offense.) Locals discovered the animals' heads just before Friday morning prayers.

3. (U) Government officials sprang into action to calm local reaction to this offense. Bangalore's Deputy Commissioner of Police, Syed Ulfath Hussein (a Muslim), and Roshan Baig, a Muslim state legislator in Karnataka's legislative assembly who represents the area (ref A), came to the area immediately and sought to assure locals that the police would investigate and take action against those responsible. Baig told us that the situation was "back to normal" by mid-day.

Neighborhood activists rile up the locals

4. (SBU) Baig said that other local leaders -- including some known trouble-makers -- used the offensive incident to stir up unrest later in the day. This agitation led to a crowd gathering and to the blockading of some of the area's narrow streets. At one point, a female motorist apparently lost her way and found herself in the midst of the protestors, bumping one, which incited a round of stone-throwing that shattered the her car's windshield. Police from the local precinct rushed to rescue the woman, and the crowd turned their stones on officers, resulting in severe injuries to at least one policeman. The police eventually arrested eight "rowdies," bringing the crowd under control.

A test of tolerance for the new government

5. (SBU) Baig praised the actions of the government and the police, saying that police efforts to work with local leaders and target only the most violent offenders was a success, in contrast to incidents in the past where the police resorted to fairly indiscriminate mass arrests of Muslim youths. The incident was a test not only for Karnataka's new BJP government, which some feared might openly antagonize Muslims (ref B), but also for Bangalore's

new police commissioner, Shankar Bidari, a long-time Consulate Chennai contact who took over as the city's top cop on July 11.

An inside job?

¶6. (SBU) Bidari told us that "local politics" was behind the ruckus, insinuating that the events may be linked to upcoming municipal elections. Some of our interlocutors told us that the original offending incident -- the placing of the pigs' heads in front of the mosques -- was likely perpetrated by certain Muslim local politicians to stir up communal support in the run-up to these elections. They told us that in previous such incidents, pig parts have been thrown over the walls of mosques haphazardly, likely by people who were outsiders (i.e., non-Muslims) afraid of being seen. In this case, however, the pig heads were placed carefully at the entrances to the mosques, suggesting that the perpetrators had enough local knowledge to feel comfortable knowing when and how to approach the entrances of the mosques without raising suspicions.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) This set of incidents was unfortunate, but could have been much worse. The fact that the police acted to defuse tensions and target only the worst offenders is a positive sign that the new BJP government has no interest in stoking sectarian tensions. It is also positive that there were apparently no groups of non-Muslims involved -- in previous incidents in Bangalore, Hindu groups have taunted protesting Muslims with offensive slogans and material (like pigs' heads), inflaming communal tensions. The allegations that local politicians might resort to mosque desecration to gain support

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are unsettling, but hint at some of the suspicions that Muslims may have about the new BJP government and its intentions towards Karnataka's Muslim minority.

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